

THE VALLEY OF OBLIVION

By
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SHE was a dear," Mrs. Osborne said, dealing the cards with a twist of deft white wrists, "but so casual about her clothes. The artistic instinct, I suppose. All the Nettletons are dowdy. I met her at Capri, before the return of the Prodigal Husband, and she looked like an Englishwoman en tour, which is the last word. But the whole story is thrilling and unusual, and Olive Nettleton was faithful enough to deserve to be happy. It is over to you, Caroline."

The girl across looked at her cards languidly. She was a very slender girl, with level brows and a direct gaze. She named a trump at random, and put down her cards with a little sigh of relief. Past Mrs. Osborne's carefully coiled head, past Lella Dixon's satirical smile when she saw the exposed cards, she

whether he died or was kidnapped or voluntarily effaced himself, everything that was worth having in Caroline Summers went with him.

"Think of it!" Mrs. Baxter persisted. "The bridesmaids and men, the bishop, everybody—well, 'Waiting at the Church!' Bella Severance was there, and she said she never put in such a half-hour. Mrs. Summers in hysterics. Every one but Caroline sure he had funk it at the last minute."

The man rose suddenly and the guitar sent a sharp discordant jangle of piano keys through the room.

"I would like to shoot him—for her," he said.

Mrs. Baxter smiled. "Don't threaten," she observed dryly. "You might happen to run across him, you know. Look at the Nettletons! Greg Nettleton is lost in New York, searched for from Alaska to Brazil, and is picked up in Rome, looking as if riotous living agreed with him. Oh, it's a mean little world after all,

that followed, the small woman in blue, who had made the fourth at the table, took up the thread of conversation.

"We were talking about Olive Nettleton—" she began, but Mrs. Baxter raised a warning, slender forefinger.

"No scandal until King gets out," she objected. "He has not yet learned that our feminine gossip is precisely the same as his masculine sense of humor—both treat of the other person's misfortunes. Only we take seriously what men treat as a joke."

Outside on the wide stone veranda Caroline was standing with her slender arms behind her, erect, poised, outwardly cold and self-contained. If the question in her eyes was almost an appeal, as she stood there alone—if there was tragedy in the corners of her mouth, there was an instant relaxation when she heard King's step behind her.

"The mater sent out some tea," he said, "and she says you look tired and are to be sure to drink it. If you don't care about it, I can pour it over the rail. Shall I trouble you if I stay here?"

"You are a friendly light chasing away shadows," she said slowly. Kingsley stood by, made absently self-conscious by the unexpected reference to what was always in his mind. The girl sipped her tea slowly, looking down the straight path with its flanking borders to where the pergola, wreathed with trumpet vine and creeper, framed the valley below.

"Dear hollyhocks and four o'clocks," she rhymed, "and the lady slippers and larkspur, and salvia—each one as prim and spruce and bright as a little New England lady in her Sunday gown. Do you know," she said whimsically, "I am an anachronism. I am not a Californian, King; not a truly bred-in-the-bone one at all. I belong here in the East, I am sure. I have the Puritan conscience."

"Then I like the Puritan conscience," he said, smiling at her.

Some one's voice was raised in the music room.

"Four years missing, my dear," the voice said, "and Olive Nettleton wandering over the continent, looking into people's faces on the street, everywhere; Rome, St. Petersburg, Cairo! Oh, it was creepy!"

"Well, it is Olive's affair," Mrs. Osborne's comfortable voice put in, "and they seem to be beginning things all over again. But suppose she had married again!"

"Olive had the Puritan conscience," came Lella Dixon's thin, clear voice. "She would never have married again, unless she had known he was dead."

Caroline had been listening, her head slightly bent. Now she looked up suddenly at the man beside her.

"I wonder if you understand, King?" she said. "It's psychology, I suppose; the problem of a small soul, at that. But—I am like that—woman they are speaking of."

Kingsley took the cup and saucer from her and put it carefully on the rail. Then he sat down somewhat awkwardly beside her.

"I'm glad you've given me a chance to speak," he said. "I'm not very agile mentally, and I can't fence with shadows. But I think I know how you feel. It's the not knowing how or why—it's a sort of wound to your pride that won't heal. Don't tell me you still love him. I don't believe it. I don't want to be brutal, but people don't love the dead; they remember them—you know that, Caroline—and everything I know of that awful time points to the one thing."

"That he is dead!" she breathed. "But I want to know; I'm like my old nurse at home, when her boy was drowned. She didn't cry; she just stood by the river bank and waited, day and night, until they found him. And then she cried, and they knew her mind was saved."

King leaned over and took one of her cold hands between his warm, brown ones.

"You said a little while ago that I drove away the shadows," he said earnestly. "Caroline, can't we face this thing together? I love you—God knows. I don't want to divide you with any one, not even a memory; but it's come to the point where I'm almost ready to throw myself on your pity. Caroline, let me drive the shadows away, always."

The girl dropped her chin into her two palms and stared frowningly ahead.

"You are like him," she said at last, "and he loved me, too. Oh, yes, whatever people may think, nothing can take that away from me. He loved me, King; and what if he should come back and find that I have not been faithful? In there!"—she nodded toward the house—"they have been talking of some woman who haunted the continent, looking into the faces of the people she met. I sit here and look out over the hills and I say, 'Which way? Which way?'"

The young man had folded his arms, and, leaning back, he too, gazed over the hills. He was baffled, discouraged, but not beaten. "If you care about him, Caroline," he said after a silence, "he was not a scoundrel. I accept that as I accept the ghost that stands between us. But suppose I can lay the ghost? Would there be a chance for me?"

"Could you save my faith?" she asked sharply, turning to him.

"I will try," he pledged solemnly.

Mrs. Baxter came languidly to the window and held the curtain aside with a sweeping gesture.

"Dear me, how intense you look!" she mocked. "Caroline, you have lost thirty dollars, and Carrie Osborne says your last make lost the rubber."

"I am coming in," the girl said wearily, and rose. Mrs. Baxter looked past her at King's face.

"Don't come," she said, more gently. "I'll take it in for you. Sit down like a good girl and make that gloomy person beside you happy."

As Caroline opened her gold purse, something dropped to the floor and rolled under a chair. With a little cry the girl picked it up and clutched it jealously. Mrs. Baxter's smile was inscrutable as she turned back into the room, and through the open window came again the voice of the little woman in blue. Not a word was lost to the two on the veranda, who listened because they must.

"I shall always call it the greatest event I ever lived through," she said, "and when you remember that I was only an onlooker, you can understand the emotional pitch. Here was poor Olive Nettleton, in the heaviest kind of *crêpe*, rushing all over Europe after exhausting America, looking for a husband who had absolutely dropped out of existence, without leaving a trace. You know what Olive is, very much like Caroline Summers"—she dropped her voice a little—"very. Well-poised and self-reliant, so you can only guess what she feels. There must have been lots of rows when Olive's emotional temperament tried to climb the fence of her hereditary conscience. You know Cassidy, the Irish artist, who tried to make her marry him, whether poor Nettleton was dead or not? Well, she stuck it out and was faithful, and lost her good looks, partly, and all her cheeriness—an attractive woman trying to be faithful to a memory has a hard time, anyhow."

"Olive had been touring the Riviera in a car, and Adelaide and I were to meet her at the Grand Hotel in Rome. The day before she was due there came a cablegram for Olive, and Adelaide opened it, for fear it was urgent. Adelaide read it and fell back in a chair, and it was a full minute before she rallied enough to give it to me. It said: 'Sailing next

dying, then we could spring Greg's cablegram, working her through one emotional climax to another."

"But you can't do those things by rule. Just as Olive drew up at the Grand Hotel in her muddy car with her face perfectly covered with dust and her hair on one side, of course, a carriage dashed up and Greg Nettleton jumped out. What did they do? My dear! It was the most disappointing thing I ever heard of. She didn't even faint. I think she had felt all along that some time she would meet him face to face, just as she did. In that instant she lost the queer, questioning look she had had for so long, and when she found Greg had little Helen in the carriage, she was illuminated! So Adelaide and I missed it after all. But we went around with Olive and helped her get some respectable gowns and sell her *crêpe*."

"What an alluring story!" Mrs. Baxter said, lightly. "And how did handsome Greg account for his four years' defection?"

The lady in blue hesitated.

"Well, he did explain," she said apologetically, "but it was not what a more worldly woman would have called an explanation. He said he had lost four years that was all; dropped them out of his life. That the last he remembered was walking across the links at the Country Club with a caddy and a bunch of clubs. You know that's where he was last seen. And the next thing he knew he was on a train in California with his mustache gone and a ticket for Los Angeles in his pocket. And it was four years later."

"All the women loved Greg Nettleton," commented Mrs. Baxter with a drawl. "It would be interesting to know if he had married in the interval."

"There was something queer," confided the narrator. "He was sitting with little Helen on his knee, and Olive beside him—he wouldn't let her move out of his sight—when he showed it to me. He gave it to Helen to play with while he told us, and it seemed incongruous, somehow. It seemed that he found on his



"THE MATER SENT OUT SOME TEA," HE SAID.

looked through the long French window to where the passing clouds cast their shadows on the hills, and down in the valley a loaded hay wagon creaked along the road.

Up here on the hilltop there was little enough air stirring. The card table had been moved to the music room for coolness; and in the shadows of the alcove a young man in white flannels picked querulously at a guitar, striking an occasional impatient note on the piano as a guide. His eyes sought the girl persistently. Mrs. Baxter, a languid shadow of some brilliant and devastating yesterday, had been "sitting-out" the rubber. She picked up her heavy jeweled purse and trilled toward the man in the shadows.

"It is profanation to gamble or to gambol—in a room like this," she said, looking down the length of the music room to where a sudden buzz of conversation showed the end of the rubber. "A music room without music is a body without a soul. I feel as though I am being facetious in the presence of a corpse."

"It is pretty bad, isn't it?" Osborne Kingsley said idly, watching Caroline Summers' white-clad figure as she rose and went to the window. "The solemnity of those marble heads, and that funereal procession of black chairs against the wall—four chairs and Brahms, four more and Chopin, four more and Liszt." "High against the wall, with all their poor weaknesses written in their marble faces for the ages to see, instead of being allowed to rot respectfully in their graves. Ah, me. And speaking of marble, how do you progress with Caroline?"

"I hardly see—" he began stiffly.

Mrs. Baxter laughed. "Caroline is a hulk," she declared. "She's a sort of frozen fire, King. Whatever happened to that man—a year ago, wasn't it?"

King, and it shrinks every year. Look how the splendid isolation of twenty gives place to the rubbing of elbows of sixty."

"And from that"—King caught her mood—"it is the merest step to the funeral urn of seventy, I suppose. Jolly, aren't we, this afternoon!"

"I cannot think of you matrimonially, King," said Mrs. Baxter. "What kind of a husband will you be? Will you be like the rest, or—will you be as you are now, just a little different?"

"I will love and honor the woman I marry," he said stiffly.

"And marry a woman you love and honor! But you will be a loving husband, King, and the marriage will be most successful, because in every happy marriage there is one who cares, and one who does not care—so much."

"And I will be—"

"The one who cares."

Tea had come in, but no one wanted tea. There were decanters and tall glasses and ice, and the bridge game had given way to scraps of gossip. Mrs. Baxter got up and walked slowly down the room. Near the table she turned.

"Caroline is on the veranda, King," she called back. "I am sure she wants her tea."

"Caroline is hopelessly temperate," Mrs. Osborne sighed as she put in the cream. "I do not know whether I am wicked or merely self-indulgent; although I suppose we are always self-indulgent when we are wicked."

"I don't agree with you," Lella Dixon said, acidly. "I think it is a lot of trouble to do what we ought not to do."

"You would, naturally," agreed Mrs. Baxter, nibbling at a stalk of mint. During the ominous pause



SHE PUT DOWN HER CARDS WITH A SIGH OF RELIEF.

steamer. Explain everything. Love, and was signed Gregory Nettleton. My dears, if Greg Nettleton had risen out of his grave and fired his headstone at me, I should not have been more shocked."

As the voice paused for greater effect, Caroline turned to King. "You see, he came back," she said.

"Olive stayed longer at Naples than she meant to, and it was not until the day Greg was due that she came to Rome. Adelaide and I had talked all week of how to break it to her best, and Adelaide, who has more diplomacy than I have, suggested we work her up to it gradually—telling her first that there was news, and then, while Olive was thinking it was Helen—that's the child, you know—and that maybe she was

finger one of those heavy old Egyptian rings with a dull red stone sunk in it, and a 'C' cut into the stone. It was strange to know that he didn't remember at all where he got it."

The girl on the veranda had sat through it all, and King had lost no single expression on her face. She sat quite still after the story was finished, then she turned to him suddenly and held out the hand that had been closed. On its palm lay a heavy gold ring of Egyptian workmanship with a dull red stone sunk into the metal.

In an instant something had gone out of the girl's face, and her mouth had lost its tragedy of uncertainty.

"I have buried my dead, King," she said at last.

Next Week, **SULZBERGER AND THE SUBWAY**

By
Gelston Spring.